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ABSTRACT

The emphasis of the Schools Council Research and Development Project at the University of Wales on teaching English to Welsh pupils aged 8-13 was on curriculum development. This paper covers the problem of acquiring the necessary basic knowledge about the needs of Welsh first language pupils in the learning of English when long-term, rigorous research studies are not possible. About 250 teachers throughout Wales completed surveys by filling in questionnaires on errors made by pupils, methods of teaching English, language textbooks in use, pupils' interests and popular reading, and all information was channelled into the preparation of classroom materials. The limitations of asking teachers to report their pupils' errors were taken into account, but useful information was gained about the influence of the Welsh language on English spelling and sentence patterns. Responses were least helpful in those areas which cause confusion among teachers, most notably idioms and spoken English. The greatest problem for teachers was the question of standards in oral work. Such limited surveys for specific purposes were found to be valuable in indicating the size and complexity of language learning and teaching problems, and also in showing the need for further teachers in-service language work, with courses in linguistics or language in education. (Author/MHP)

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ENGLISH IN WALES

SURVEYS FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

A paper presented to the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the

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English in Wales: surveys for curriculum development

1 The Project

The Schools Council Research and Development Project on 'The Teaching and Learning of English in Wales, 8 - 13' was based in the Department of Education, University College of Swansea from 1 September, 1973 to 31 August, 1977. It was established as a result of the previous work on Attitudes to Welsh and English, and the recommendations of the Gittins Report (1967). The main aim was to consider the needs of the Welsh first language pupil in the learning of English and to prepare materials for both teachers and pupils. This work could not be carried out in isolation, however, because the linguistic background in the vast majority of schools in Wales is either English or mixed in varying proportions, and because the bilingual pupil whose second language is English needs to adopt English first language methods and materials at some stage. English for the Welsh first language pupil was studied in the total context of English in the schools of Wales for pupils aged 8 to 13.

The full-time members of the Project team were Mr. Gilbert Bennett (Senior Research Officer) and Mr. Cyril Treharne (Research Officer). A network of six School Units and nine Teachers Groups was established in order to involve about 250 teachers in the work, and they were consulted about policy decisions as well as on matters of detailed classroom practice. The School Units were in predominantly Welsh-speaking areas and each contained a secondary school (in one case, a grammar school and a secondary modern school) and six of the contributing primary schools. The Teachers Groups were in areas covering a wide range of linguistic backgrounds, and on average each included five secondary English specialists and ten primary teachers with a special interest in language work.

The emphasis was on curriculum development and this paper is about one part of one aspect: the problem of acquiring the necessary basic knowledge to supplement that already available from previous research, including the Attitude Project results. Limited time and resources precluded long-term, rigorous research studies.

2 The surveys

During the first fifteen months teachers in the network were asked to provide information needed for the developmental aspects. Questionnaires were drawn up and completed by interview in Unit schools(which were visited regularly by team members) and after discussion in Groups.

Five surveys were carried out in this way, all designed to feed directly into the preparation of trial materials for classroom use.

a Error analysis - commented on in the next section.

b Methods of teaching English - the results were similar to those of the more extensive and rigorous Bullock Report survey. Our intention was to ensure that suggested materials and schemes of work would fit into existing patterns and yet lead on to more effective approaches.

c Language textbooks in use.

d Pupils' interests - so that they could form the basis of thematic work, precisely in the first two years of the secondary school, more loosely in the junior school.

e Popular reading.

Because of the nature of the exercise, the results have no statistical validity or reliability. They were not published, but they were distributed throughout Wales in duplicated form, with permission for LEAs to reproduce all or part. Apart from their value to the Project team in developing materials, they have proved of interest and help to many teachers of English, particularly but not exclusively those in predominantly Welsh-speaking areas.

3 Error analysis

The compromise between fundamental research and curriculum development is well illustrated by this survey. The aim was to find out the errors actually made by pupils aged 8 to 13 in the learning of English, not so that lists could be prepared to be learnt by heart, but rather so that the problem words and patterns could be built in to contexts encountered by pupils and their use encouraged by the language tasks set.

The questionnaire asked teachers to list common errors made by their pupils under the headings of spelling, pronunciation, punctuation, plurals, agreement, word order/sentence construction, idiom, double negatives, misuse of vocabulary, incomplete sentences and the use of Welsh words in English. Other questions covered differences between Welsh first language and English first language pupils and the quality of English in the local community.

In the event very little 'analysis' proved possible, but useful lists of errors were gathered. The limitations of the method are obvious; for instance, we all regularly detect certain errors and are blind or deaf to others; again, standards of judgment vary greatly. The information given about spelling and syntax was accurate and extensive. In contrast, the word 'idiom' was not well understood by many of the teachers completing the questionnaire, while there was great confusion about pronunciation. A reference to 'local variants' divided the teachers into three camps: those who thought they were never acceptable (and were therefore always errors); those who thought their acceptability depended on context; and those who clearly failed to distinguish variations of this nature.

It was possible to examine some differences between English and Welsh classes. A Welsh class was defined as one in which there was at least 25% Welsh first language pupils. For example, English phonetic spelling mistakes (muther, sed) were rare in Welsh classes and common in English classes, while Welsh phonetic spelling mistakes (myther, modder) were frequent in Welsh classes and very rare in English classes. For some reason, Welsh classes make very few mistakes with silent letters (knee, cupboard), a common source of error in English classes, especially with the younger age-groups (8, 9 and 10 year-olds).

Some of the most interesting and helpful information concerned the influence of the Welsh language on English spelling and syntax. This influence is a problem for Welsh first language pupils learning English at the junior school stage (8 to 10+) but most pass through it without undue trouble. For some weaker pupils, however, it remains a problem throughout the secondary school, and needs specific attention.
[The following examples were distributed to the audience beforehand.]

Examples of Welsh influence on English spelling in response to the questionnaire:-

mai (my), myther, modder (mother), ddy (the), uw, iw (you), feri (very), hi (he), yp (up), rifer (river), rwm (room), byt (but), mawth (mouth) fadder (father), hafe (have), ai (I), ddei (they), odder (other), milc (milk), shi (she), tw (to), hyr (her), laic (like), bwc (book), brythe r (brother), ryff (rough), efri (every), ffriend (friend), taim (time), swn (soon), owt (out), weadder (weather), hw (who), iff (if), gwd (good), cwming (coming), howse (house), ffarm (farm), elefyn (eleven), bac (back), ol (all), wi (wee), meni (many), ffwt (foot), pwt (put), ofer (over), cept (kept), trowsers (trousers), widd (with), leic (lake), thrw (through), cwd (could), swt (soot), wyrk (work), côt (caught), fwd (food), hws (whose), cloc (clock), ffilm (film) ddem (them), ynder (under), ourselfes (ourselves).

Similarly, the following examples of syntactical or idiomatic confusion were quoted:-

Mr. Williams the name of the headmaster is.

Going to bed he is. Gone he had. Having a meal they are.

Red was the bus. In the garage the car was.

Stainless steel tanks some farmers have instead of churns.

There are two cows with us.

I drink a milk. I eat a meat.

My father went to put food to the cows.

Making a tree house I also liked doing.

Who belongs to this pencil? I am here since two hours.

He laughed on my head. I want to rise a ticket.

Comment on the examples:

1. Welsh phonetic values are transferred to English. Pronunciation varies

from area to area in Wales, and sometimes children make mistakes, as with rwm for room (though it does depend on how room is pronounced).

2. We can distinguish sentence patterns which are literal translations from the Welsh language and those which are part of the Welsh variety of English, through the distinction sometimes causes argument even amongst experts.

Also of interest were the additional comments made by an unusually high proportion (30.8%) of those who completed the questionnaire. These expressions of opinion, often well based on experience, were valuable, not least in indicating the difficulties in a bilingual area. Because time is limited, the summary which follows is of comments from teachers in the predominantly Welsh-speaking areas only.

A minority think that Welsh first language pupils have no special problems in the learning of English and that they can be taught as English first language pupils from the time they enter school. One secondary teacher, for example, stated that there was too much emphasis on oral work, that bilingual children were not in any way inferior in English work, and that the Project was perhaps creating a problem. In contrast, the majority considered that Welsh first language pupils did have specific problems, especially but not exclusively in the early stages, and their views are supported by our results. Few would agree with the extreme and over-simplified statement that 'children from Welsh areas make the most mistakes', but two teachers commented on pupils' limited vocabulary and saw this as a basic weakness which persisted through the secondary school, notably with Welsh first language pupils. A third made the same point by suggesting that the bilingual pupil was handicapped by 'double learning', which limited his vocabulary; this limitation was combined with the effect of literal translation to make a severe impact on English progress, particularly in the case of the pupil of below average ability. Others mentioned the small number of pupils in Welsh-speaking areas who lead isolated lives on remote farms, with no English conversation at all outside school. On the other side again, one teacher was able to affirm that Welsh first language pupils speak and write correct English far more often than English pupils in England, and that their worst fault was poor hand-writing.

This picture of varying attitudes and levels of sophistication was repeated in the comments from English areas. Solutions to the problems were equally varied, ranging from more basic grammar in schools to improving the quality of English in the total environment, especially on television (perhaps by royal decree?). Without doubt, the real problem areas in second language learning (even the kind represented by English for Welsh first language pupils) are those not readily covered by national surveys - fluency and command of idiom.

4. Conclusions

Investigation of this kind is better than no research at all, but it is restricted in its application to the immediate task. We were not concerned, for example, with patterns of the incidence of errors but with the fact of their occurrence in a number of schools. In another case, pupils' interests, it would not be worthwhile to conduct rigorous research because interests are subject to 'fashion' and results have a limited application anyway.

An unforeseen result of the surveys was the additional light they threw on the nature and complexity of the English language learning and teaching problems. The most difficult area for teachers is oral work, and within that area the question of standards, for many are seeking firm, precise guidance which cannot be given in the abstract. This emphasizes the need for more in-service language work of all kinds, ranging from one-year full-time courses on Linguistics or Language in Education to local groups studying and discussing principles in the light of classroom 'language happenings' and their own practice.

We recommend that all teachers should carry out their own class, school and local area surveys of, for instance, spelling, punctuation and pronunciation in order to inform their teaching. We found cases of teachers who knew their pupils' weaknesses and who were wrong in their assessment.

5 General aspects

a Our conclusions and recommendations about the needs of Welsh first language pupils in the learning of English are given in the first chapter of the handbook for teachers.

b Publications:

i English in Wales: a practical guide for teachers

Discussion of principles and methods - detailed classroom suggestions for age range 8 to 13.

ii Prototype materials for pupils, 8 to 13.

All are published by the Schools Council and are available from the Welsh Books Council, Queen's Square, Aberystwyth.

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